The front runner for the winner of the roll-off-the-tongue crime word of the year award has to be 'violence'.

It seems as though every major or minor crime being committed in Australia is either linked with, or caused by, some violent act.

The word itself contains a store house of imagery; imagery that induces factual or fantasy laden fear in most people, particularly amongst the young and the elderly of our communities.

Like the word 'assault', violence when used to outline or detail the circumstances of an offence, the profile of an offender or plight the of a victim, usually takes the interpreter down the path of a worst case scenario.

We assume all reported violent crime is of the most serious kind. Categories of violent crimes are seemingly always committed by violent criminals who, is presumed, inflict the most serious and savage harm on innocent victims. In this scenario almost all victims are seen as having been momentarily violated by an act of viciousness, leaving them permanently damaged with a lifetime of scars and memories, or leaving them dead.

Unfortunately violence begets violence and again unfortunately linking violence with almost every reported "crime against the person" begets that very perception. We become convinced that violence is in fact a common and major ingredient of all contemporary urban and rural crime.

In fact we are in danger of all becoming victims ourselves; victims of wrongful perception.

If we think that there is more crime than there really is and if we think that more crime means more violent crime, then we likely to leap to unproven conclusions that portray sections of our society as either totally under siege and/or in the hands of a criminal element that is controlling our lives.

There is no doubt that crimes of violence are receiving much more media attention and are generating much more community awareness or concern than has previously been the case.

Because most Australians are removed from crime, violent or not, either as offenders or victims, then we tend to rely on media comment for knowledge as our only and hopefully accurate source of analysis of the facts and issues, when crimes of violence are "reported" to us.

In relying on the media in this way we, as individuals and as communities, are trapped into the view that all crime is violent crime and that all violence (as with assaults) is of the most horrific kind.

There are numerous studies that have been undertaken in recent years, both nationally and internationally, that examine the issue of the difference between the public perception and reality of violent crime.

In a paper presented earlier this year in Canada by one of the ACPC Brisbane Conference's key note speakers, Professor Ezzat Fattah recalled one such Canadian government study of the 1980's. Professor Fattah noted that when widely held perceptions about the seriousness and violence of crime are checked against a range of objective or statistical reference points, they prove to be, more often than not, wrong.

Other studies over the last decade have provided similar results and contemporary Australian studies form part of these international findings. A major outcome our society jumping to inaccurate conclusions about violent crime is the inevitable call that, if such crime is getting out of hand, then we need to exert pressure on governments for stronger and tougher measures to curb the chaos.

In acknowledging that serious and violent crime is ever with us and may indeed be incrementally increasing within pockets of Australian society, we never-the-less need to exercise continual caution in understanding and analysing the reality of its spread.

It is critical that the number of crimes associated with violence of any sort, remain in the minority. All too often our wrong perceptions become the unintended trigger that lead to a "talking up" of violent crime, way beyond its actuality.

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